

DELFEAYO MARSALIS | DAVE LIEBMAN

# DOWNBEAT<sup>®</sup>

Jazz

*SONGS OF ASCENSION*

**GREGORY  
PORTER**

**LAKECIA BENJAMIN**

APRIL 2020

U.K. £4.00

\$6.99US \$6.99CAN

04>



DOWNBEAT.COM

## **BRASS SCHOOL**

**REX RICHARDSON** *on Chops Endurance*

**NICK FINZER** *Trombone Transcription*

**IAN CAREY** *Master Class*

# GREGORY BY JOSEF WOODARD PHOTO BY KEN WEINGART PORTER 'PAST THE GATES OF GENRES'

When considering the artistic legacy of Bakersfield, California, many people think of country music legends Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, and the so-called “Bakersfield Sound.”

**T**hose icons are no longer with us, but Owens’ venue in town, the Crystal Palace, remains in operation. Five years ago, Bakersfield became home to another important, influential musician. Singer Gregory Porter, who grew up in Bakersfield, moved back to town, along with his wife and now 6-year-old son. The family has settled into a spacious, Georgian-style home, situated in a different neighborhood than the one where Porter grew up.

Porter’s musical life began here as a church vocalist before moving to New York and expanding his musical reach to include theater, jazz and soul. A songwriter who craftily inserts references to his life and upbringing, he ends his new album, *All Rise* (Blue Note), with a specific Bakersfield reference. On the track “Thank You,” Porter describes an epiphany he experienced as a child singing at a Pentecostal tent service “between Lakeview and Haley Street/ That’s where the church would meet.” It seems the higher that Porter’s global profile soars, the more he leans into the roots of his youth.

Just in the past six years, Porter—now 48—has enjoyed a meteoric rise, especially in the infrastructure of jazz, but also spilling into the pop and r&b fields. After releasing two critically acclaimed albums, *Water* (2011) and *Be Good* (2012), for the Motéma label, Porter signed to Blue Note and earned Grammy awards for *Liquid Spirit* (2013) and *Take Me To The Alley* (2016).

*All Rise* represents a significant step forward in Porter’s oeuvre, as his most gospel-oriented and most “produced” project yet. It also marks the return of his songwriting voice, after stepping away from original material with a 2017 tribute to a prime influence on *Nat King Cole & Me*. This latest chapter, a willfully and artfully varied collection of 15 original songs, finds Porter juggling elements of gospel, soul, pop and jazz with tracks featuring the London Symphony Orchestra and horn-section charts woven into the mix.



Gregory Porter outside his home in Bakersfield, California, on Jan. 7

"People talk about music therapy, and I find myself thinking, 'Wow, that's what I'm doing, in a lot of ways,'" Porter said.

STEVEN SUSSMAN



Producer roles were handled by his longtime ally, Kamau Kenyatta, and Troy Miller, whose multiple talents—as drummer, arranger, producer, and engineer—have made him a powerful aide de camp.

In a phone interview, Miller told *DownBeat*, "On this record, Gregory wanted to be more open to exploring new things and in typical Gregory fashion—and very deliberately so—left the sessions [open] to spontaneity. That was coupled with having his band there, who have mostly been with him throughout his touring journey. This made for a really creative and communal atmosphere."

An affable conversationalist, Porter sat down with *DownBeat* on a cool January afternoon in the cozy context of his dimly lit, wood-lined den. Poised for the release of and promotional touring to support *All Rise*, he acknowledged that he will face questions about his musical style.

"Maybe my voice goes past genre," he reflected, "and some of my writing and some of the collaborations and remixes have taken me past the gates of genres. I'm OK with that. I always consider myself a jazz singer, even if I'm singing something that's not jazz, per se.

"But above that is the message—if it's a message of irrepressible love or mutual respect or justice or just something insightful about love and life. I really am most concerned about the message, and if the ears are catching it."

Below are edited excerpts from the conversation.

**One theme of *All Rise* is the power of love, earthly and otherwise, at a time when the**

**world seems especially fragile and vulnerable. Does this album, and your music, serve as an escape or an antidote to harsher realities?**

People talk about music therapy, and I find myself thinking, "Wow, that's what I'm doing, in a lot of ways." I sing to soothe and give comfort to myself. I've done it since I was a little boy. My voice and a greater message have always made me feel better, made me feel like I had something, even with empty pockets.

In college [at University of California San Diego], I was poor. I broke my shoulder and wasn't able to play football anymore. Whatever things happened, whatever difficulties came up, I always felt, "Well, I've always got my music," even if it was just me and the music. It was not even using it as a way to make money, but as a thing to comfort me.

[When] I started this album, I started to write about our dear president and the kind of space that we're in right now. The first four or five songs were about something he would do, one day to the next, some slight disrespect, some covert disrespect. I said, "Let me shake this off and go within, and eventually, something about that will find its way out in some more clever poetry." There are songs that deal with reality, like "Real Truth." Truth has many different versions.

I needed to come from my place, my home, and talk about these other things that might be on my mind, from a political or social standpoint. It had to come from my perspective, as opposed to just reacting.

I wanted to go back to my normal way, which is observation of the world and what I think about love.

**This is your most gospel-oriented record, and even the title, *All Rise*, could refer to church rituals or a spiritual direction. But it could also refer to a public declaration, as might happen in a courtroom or a political context.**

Yes, it's something that could happen in a public space or when some dignified person comes into the room. But I'm using it [to say] that *all* of us rise, not just a singular important person, but a roomful of important people [laughs]. We *all* ascend—the whole family.

Everybody has an expression. Children do. Broken people have something to say that can be deeper and more insightful than a college professor. A crackhead who has been there has some wisdom that can be gleaned. Maybe that's idealistic and foolish, but I think that way.

It's funny. I sang "The 'In' Crowd" on one of my records [*Liquid Spirit*], kind of in jest. I go on these television shows around the world and they asked me to do that song. They missed the point of why I did it. At the very end of the song, it's like I'm on the outside looking in.

I think about mutual respect and equality. Whether it comes out in every note or every song, the same themes keep coming out of me as I write. There's a continuity to my thought processes, however simple.

The brevity of the blues is interesting to me, and subtlety and nuance and irony, sometimes. Sometimes it's not afforded you if you have a big voice and a big sound and you're a big person. Sometimes it's not afforded you if you're black. But I try to take advantage of all of the things that exist for any writer. I think there's a wisdom in brevity.

**Your songwriting does embrace brevity, focusing on simple yet powerful phrases and also on repetition. I take it you're not afraid of repetition, are you?**

First of all, my family doesn't have a long, deep tradition in jazz. We have a long and deep tradition in gospel music and the church. [Porter's mother was a preacher.] Sometimes, the repetition is not for ease. It's for the build. It's for concentration. And as we use it in jazz, it's to set the framework and then to slightly step out of the framework. You repeat the phrase, but it will be slightly different—or you're singing it a third below or above.

But repetition [also involves] sending the message home, leaving the listener with something. The song has washed over them. And there's something to even vagueness, leaving it open to the listener's interpretation, but with a strong understanding that there's an emotional depth to it, so people think, "I have to figure that out. What are you saying?"

I like it when people stop me on the street and say, "What are you saying?" or, "What did that girl do?" You understand what I'm saying? "That girl did something to you. She broke your

heart. You didn't say it, but I can hear it."

I'm not afraid of repetition. ... It's a tradition of both blues and gospel. I think about these traditions and how they grew up in the same house and were played by the same people, the same families. In my household, I heard gospel and blues, and I could hear the cross-pollination.

When I was in church and I sang, and I finally got to hear a taste of jazz, I thought, "I've been doing this my whole life, singing the phrase and then deviating from that phrase, changing the rhythm, singing in front of the

who have been classified as jazz singers and ones that have not been—and you hear the gospel music in jazz. What I'm saying is: Listen to Mahalia Jackson and you'll hear jazz [laughs].

### **The new album opens with the uplifting song "Concorde." What was the impetus for that one?**

I was on an international flight, coming back home. I had a big, long tour and had done concerts and an important TV show. The song "Concorde" just came to me. I was thinking about the actual plane that flies 60,000 feet in the air, at twice the speed of sound. I need to get

whole musical about it—*Nat King Cole & Me*, the same title as my last record. But the musical was how I came to Nat's music in the absence of my father. I needed a warm, comforting voice and words of wisdom, and they happened to come from these vinyl [records] from Nat, as opposed to coming from my father.

You can think of it as sad, but it's beautiful at the same time. He's a pretty cool guy to latch onto. In my little 5-, 6-, 8-year-old mind, I would imagine him as my father. He looked the part, if you looked at his album covers, sitting by a fire with a sweater on [points to his own sweater, glances at the nearby fireplace and laughs softly].

### **There is a noticeable production value on this album, maybe more than on your earlier projects.**

Yeah, there is more production. But it's really just letting the songs come organically, trying different things. Sometimes, I would just have a vision in my head of what the song was, and boom—"Let's get that on wax." But this time, we would be locked into something for days. I was like, "Let's flip that rhythm around." I walked over to the bass marimba and said, "Let's put that on 'Merchants Of Paradise' and see what it sounds like."

It was in my plan to work with [producer] Troy [Miller], in maybe a bigger way, maybe a bit more produced way. But I'm still there, in the DNA of the music, and the way I do things is still there. There's no wholesale change.

### **The songs are more compact, and there is at least one that clocks in under three minutes.**

There are a couple. There is the little folk song, "Modern Day Apprentice." There is this idea of being radio-friendly, which is maybe what you're thinking about or getting at.

### **Not necessarily. The songs still have sophisticated turns and things that a jazz ear would appreciate. But songs are compact, except for "Real Truth," where you stretch out and include longer solos—including a wild, cool Moog solo by Miller.**

I'm thinking of the whole [package]. I think "Revival" is very different from "Merry-Go-Round." When I think of a modern jazz singer, who has to consider Frank Sinatra, Nat "King" Cole, Sammy Davis Jr. and then Leon Thomas and then go to some other eras—Andy Bey—there are so many layers, and it's all valid.

The modern jazz singer has so many wonderful choices. He doesn't always have to [sings a "ting-ting-ta-ting" swing cymbal pattern, sings "This is the end of a beautiful ... ."] That's beautiful. I want to do that, and I also want to do something that's spiritually driven. I also want to do something influenced by the electric period of Herbie Hancock.

# 'I WAS SINGING JAZZ BEFORE I KNEW WHAT JAZZ WAS.'

beat and then behind the beat." That's something we played with. I was singing jazz before I knew what jazz was.

### **It's widely acknowledged that gospel is the basis of r&b and a lot of pop music. But we don't hear enough about it also being part of the seeds of jazz. Why is that, do you think?**

Yeah. It's all over. Yes, there are these sacred songs, but it has to be considered—in particular, with the African American gospel singer. Maybe you have to get away from the Tin Pan Alley songs—but not too far. Maybe you deal with the more original songs, of a Leon Thomas or Abbey Lincoln or Dianne Reeves. There are many voices you could say that are directly connected to spirituality.

Sometimes, the people who are writing about it and thinking about it have no experience in that realm. Unless it's recorded and put in front of them and shown, maybe they don't know the connections. But I've never separated them. I close my eyes and feel this spirituality in jazz music. Yes, it can be very cerebral and thoughtful, but I've always caught the spirit in jazz music. When I sing Wayne Shorter's "Black Nile," I feel it that way. I feel it when I sing "Work Song"—I feel it like it's a gospel song.

Obviously, with the music of Horace Silver or Bobby Timmons, you can make the connection, because that hard-bop sound was directly making a connection to the blues and gospel music. But you look to the singer—the ones

home, I need to get to my 6-year-old, as fast as I can. I'm trying to get to the ground as fast as I can—my wife and my son, my family, my coffee shop. These are the things that make my home. No disrespect to being at the Grammys or television shows or these kinds of things, but the coolest reception is when I come [home] and my son runs to the car. That's dope to me.

### **A grimmer family saga is described in "Dad Gone Thing," one of the songs you've written about your father—and his absence. Is this an ongoing investigation for you?**

I'm still trying to find him. He's been gone 25 years now, and I'm still trying to find him in some way. When I went to my father's funeral, person after person would stand up and talk about, "Oh, boy, your daddy could sing," among other things I didn't know about him.

He was in the military. I knew he was an extraordinary carpenter. I knew how important the church was to him and what a charismatic, great guy he was to so many people.

He didn't show me any time or affection or interest. So when I say, "You didn't teach me a dad gone thing but how to sing," the very thing that takes me around the world is my voice. In a way, I'm slighting him and then praising him.

### **Do you have other father-related songs that no one has heard yet?**

I've written some more. This is an ongoing inquiry. It's an ongoing conversation. I wrote a



Porter, shown here in his home, frequently tours internationally.

What did Nat “King” Cole have to draw from? He had what came before him. But we have Louis Armstrong, Nat and everything that came after Nat. So, in addition to that, throw in the gospel influence, the soul influence, and then you’re quite free. If this music is free and open, if we say that jazz means freedom and open expression, then I think there’s room for all of the things that I’m uttering.

**Your song “Long List Of Troubles” riffs on the theme of “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” What got you thinking on that?**

When I think about the blues and its renewing quality, music has been so important in African American culture. Often, it’s where we tell our troubles. It’s therapy—blues and gospel.

In my church when I was growing up, we had “testimony service,” where members of the congregation stood up and told any story about what they’re going through. A lot of times, it would be about some sorrowful thing. Sometimes, there would be a twist at the end, where they’re saved and they find some help or some resurrection. But sometimes, they didn’t and it was just a bad story. I think, “Man, this is the blues.”

But afterwards, everybody feels better. You sing some congregational song about “Ah, there may be trouble right now, but in the end, it will be all right.” Everybody feels good when there’s a telling of some difficulty that you surmount.

**Is that true, in your case?**

Yes, in my case, I have a passive-aggressive personality. I think it comes out in my music, too, with all these hidden slights. I have been through a lot of things and, because of music, I have a way to handle it. I even have a way to vent. I even have a way to get revenge.

**I’m wondering whether your song “Mister Holland,” about the father of a white high school girl you were courting, is an example of that. Was there a Mr. Holland?**

A real Mr. Holland? Well, [I considered the name of keyboardist] Jools Holland, and [he has a] daughter named Rosie Mae. Those are just great names. I happened to be on tour with them when I was working on the song.

But it’s a rewriting of my history. I went to the door and [the man actually said], “Get away from my door, nigger.”

**You are in a continuum of artists including Nat, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, who have blended genres. Do you feel a sense of falling in musical succession with historical figures?**

I feel it’s firmly part of me. How foolish would it be of me to neglect an enormous part of my tradition, which is gospel music and soul music, and finding out about the experience of the blues and realizing that my gospel expression was so close to it. It would be foolish for me to disrespect any part of that. Somebody called me an r&b singer as a slight one time, and I said, “That’s a hell of a slight. Thank you.” If I did anything as soulful as James Brown, to do anything like Sam Cooke—*wow*.

**Or Al Green. You’re doing something similar to him by delivering messages simultaneously secular and spiritual, maybe sneaking some religion into the mix. Is that the case, from your perspective?**

Oh, yeah. It was funny to be in Ibiza. The music of the day there is [*sings a techno beat*] dance music. Being in front of this crowd of 19- to 25-year-olds, none of the guys have on shirts, all the women are in bikinis, and singing a song that is the synthesis of my mother’s Sunday sermon. They’re *getting* it.

[Porter channels his mother’s preaching, including phrases similar to those in his song “Liquid Spirit”]: “Reroute the love. Let it flow where I want to go! There are some people down the road that are thirsty. Give them love, too! The people are thirsty because man’s unnatural hand is rearranging the way we’re supposed to be. Watch what happens when the people who haven’t been loved catch wind that there’s love coming down the way!”

It’s so amazing to see them getting it but they don’t even know they’re getting it.

**On the deluxe edition of the album, there’s a song titled “You Can Join My Band.” You sing, “My changes and arrangements don’t fit with the modern day/ I sing of love and nobody’s listening.” Do you sometimes feel like an outsider?**

I have, at times. I live in Bakersfield [*laughs*]. I’m from here. That automatically makes you an outsider. I remember so many times, both in California and in New York—sometimes, the jazz stage is a difficult stage to join, to get on. I’ve been dismissed many times. Funny enough, jazz is the most seemingly open, in a way, in terms of age and maybe size. But still, there can be some exclusivity. I remember many a night, just waiting to be the last singer, and still not making it at some jam session.

**It seems like you were never one to zero in on what was popular at a given time, to intentionally court success.**

I like my career. I like that I got here doing me. Along the way, there have been a ton of ways that people said I couldn’t be, that I had to change. I had to come out singing standards. I had to do this and that—“Dump your band. Get all superstars.” Maybe I’m an underachiever.

I still feel grounded. I still feel like I hear my mother, my family, my people, myself, in the music. I’m not ashamed of anything I’ve put on a record in terms of the content of what I said, and how I will make people feel in 20 years. I haven’t talked about nobody’s ass or titties. And I’ve still sold a bunch of records.

My mother’s there. The truth is there. I like the fact that a song like “Liquid Spirit” is drawn from my mother’s sermon, and it can have [millions of] streams. But it’s not [about] the numbers. Ever since *Water*, my first record, I just wanted to make music that sounded good and would get my voice out, get my message and musical DNA out, and hopefully the sound would be honest and pleasing to some people. I never expected the Grammys or any of the success that I’ve had.

I’m just blown away, and thankful to the tradition of jazz, and other music. There is a pavement, a road that has already been laid down by some people. And I’m so thankful and amazed that I can go around the world. **DB**